Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: George Gavutis
Date of Interview: October 18, 2002
Location of Interview: Kensington, NH
Interviewer: Dorothe Norton

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 33 years (mid 1960's to 1995)

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: summer student a Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Massachusetts (1960-1962), Temporary laborer, GS 5 at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge Massachusetts; Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge (Edwin B. Forsythe now), New Jersey; Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, New York; Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, New Jersey; Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Massachusetts; Regional Office, Region 5 (started in Boston, then office moved to Newton, then to Amherst).

Most Important Projects: Establishing Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge

Colleagues and Mentors: J.C. Appel**,** Tom Stokes, Denny Holland, Gordon Nightingale, Bill French, Ed Moses, Jack Fillio, Merton Radway, Alan Carter, Tom Horn, Larry Smith, Tom McAndrews, Lynn Greenwalt, George Gage, Noble Buell, Bill Ashe

Most Important Issues: overabundance of deer at Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and getting hunting established there to help control population

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Gavutis starts off talking about early life, college, military, meeting his wife, getting married, and having children. He talks about the refuges he worked at, including the regional office in Region 3, people he knew and worked with, and the type of work he did at each refuge/office. He shares several stories of his time with the Fish and Wildlife Service, including his most frightening experience and the highpoint of his career. He also discusses how the land for the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was supposed to be a jetport for New York and how it was saved by the public. He discusses what he's doing now, which includes working as a contractor doing bird surveys on refuges, and working for other agencies such as the Lamprey River Advisory Committee, Audubon Society of New Hampshire, and The Nature Conservancy.

Keywords: history, employee, biologist, biography, military, habitat work, mapping, marshlands, changes in the Service, refuges, manager, supervisor, banding, waterfowl, Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, nesting birds surveys, waterfowl studies, airboat, law enforcement, surveying, farming and grazing programs, fires

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program
Subject/USFW Retiree: George Gavutis
Date:
Interviewed by: Dorothe Norton

Dorothe Norton:
Well good morning George, my name is Dorothe Norton and I'm here to do this interview for the archives. It's very nice to meet you. It's not difficult to meet people that work for Fish and Wildlife Service that you've never met before because they're all pretty good people, and that's important.

So the first thing I'd like you to tell me would be your birthplace and date.

George Gavutis:
I was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is about 1/2 an hour from here, southwest. And I was born on November 30, 1939.

Dorothe Norton:
And your parent's names?

George Gavutis:
My mother was Dorothy and my father was George also. So I'm George, Jr. and my son is George III.

Dorothe Norton:
And what did your parent's do? Did they have jobs, education?

George Gavutis:
They both just went to high school I believe. And my father was a fireman, a permanent fireman on Lawrence Fire Department; he was a captain when he retired. And he also moonlighted; he helped us put the roof on this house, and did a lot of roofing and siding on the side. And he liked to fish. My mother worked I believe at first in textile mills in Lawrence, which was a big mill town. And then she worked as a receptionist and telephone operator at a company that made sheet metal; lockers and tables and things like that in Lawrence.

Dorothe Norton:
So where did you spend your early years?

George Gavutis:
Well, I lived in Lawrence, which is a city of only about a square mile. And maybe at its peak, not when I was there, it probably had less, but it was like 80,000 people. We lived on the outskirts of the city where there were back yards and things. But I was a country boy in the city, I didn't like the city at all, and I still don't like cities. Sandra likes cities, and so we kind of compromised on where we lived and where we'd go. And I used to fish in the Merrimack River and hunt along the Merrimack River, which is about a mile from my home. I could walk there after high school or in the summers.

Dorothe Norton:
What high school did you go to?

George Gavutis:
Lawrence High School.

Dorothe Norton:
And what year did you graduate?

George Gavutis:
In 1957.

Dorothe Norton:
And what university did you attend?

George Gavutis:
I went to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Dorothe Norton:
And what degree did you get?

George Gavutis:
Natural Science and Wildlife Management.

Dorothe Norton:
Very good, okay. What aspect of your formal education equipped you for the future?

George Gavutis:
Mostly it was the piece of paper that I needed! Actually, I knew birds very well. I learned a lot of wildlife management and refuge management. I learned more in my summers working at Parker National Wildlife Refuge, which is where Jack ended up managing and I managed for awhile too. In the summer of '60,'61,'62 and one fall I worked at Parker River. And so I learned how to identify waterfowl and band ducks and do all kinds of things there. So I feel like my formal education in botany and things like that I did learn, and forestry I picked up a lot of things I didn't know. But I knew birds since I was 9 years old, I bought my own bird books and I used to have feeders and things, even in the city, or in the suburbs of the city. So I enjoyed my science classes more than anything else. I didn't like math as much.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you have any mentors or courses that especially stuck with you?

George Gavutis:
Well, I think J. C. Appel, who was the manager at Parker River, and some of his staff like Tom Stokes, who was also interviewed by Tom, he was the maintenance foreman. People like that

taught me an awful lot. I mean, on refuges I learned how to run a dump truck and road grader and everything else and equipment and how to maintain equipment, which was I think valuable when I became a refuge manager. I understood the whole program.

J. C. Appel was actually at Chincoteague, where Denny Holland was after he was at Parker River, but he hired me as a student and finally got me on permanent at Montezuma Refuge ultimately.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you think there were any adverse influences, or was any?

George Gavutis:
You mean on refuges?

Dorothe Norton:
In your career.

George Gavutis:
Not really. I think I had some, you know we all have our ups and downs in our careers. I felt my years in the field were my most productive and most interesting to me because I'm basically more of a biologist field person. But I did well I guess, and not well enough that they didn't let me out of the Regional Office once they got me in there! Everybody that went to Parker River Refuge, which was like my 4th or 5th assignment, we moved 4 times in 5 years (**unclear**), jumped from refuge to refuge. So it was second refuge where I was in charge when I went to Parker River, and was 2 or 3 managers after J. C. Appel was there. But everybody from that station, once you left there, you went to the Regional Office! If you look at the list Gordon Nightingale and Bill French and everybody that ever was at Parker River... What's his name, O'Connor, I can't of his first name, he's probably in Washington now, but I can't think of his first name. But everybody that went there... Ed Moses. Jack Fillio was the only exception. Jack Fillio was the last one there and he was the first one of a long list of refuge managers that never got the ride straight into the Regional Office!

So when we moved here we knew we were going to the Regional Office next, and so we built this place. Up until then we lived in refuge housing mostly. And we even occupied the lighthouse at Parker River for 6 months while we built this house, which was the residence there.

Dorothe Norton:
Is Parker River close by here?

George Gavutis:
Yes, it's about a half an hour on the coast, it's right on the coast; it's a barrier beach and salt marsh refuge. It's one of the more heavily utilized and well-known Region 5 refuges. It's like Chincoteague. It's a lot like Chincoteague, sand dunes and marshes and a lot of waterfowl and a lot of people.

Dorothe Norton:
I know I would have liked to have stopped yesterday was at the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge over in York, but traffic was such, and it was already 6 o'clock and I knew the visitor's center probably wouldn't... I didn't even know if they had a visitor's center...

George Gavutis:
They don't have a formal visitor's center. Rachel Carson is like 10 different units scattered from all over Portsmouth to Portland, so it's sort of like a 60-mile area. But the main headquarters is at Wells. It would be nice for you to get there. They have a lovely nature trail and a dedication park for Rachel Carson and a view from the woods looking out across the marsh and across the barrier sand dunes and then out onto the ocean. So you can take in quite a few habitats. And there's a boardwalk there out onto the marsh.

Dorothe Norton:
I'll have to do that next time.

George Gavutis:
Yeah, about an hour or two to see it and that would give you a feel for all the other units too. That's where the plaque is though for Rachel Carson's dedication.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you do any military service?

George Gavutis:
I was in the Army in the Reserves, Army Reserves for like 7 years. And I was on active duty only for 6 months, and then for a couple of weeks every summer, or some of the summers anyways. I was moving around so much the Army had trouble catching up with me for summer assignments, the paperwork you know. Like I said, we moved 4 times in 5 years, and then we slowed down and stayed at a place for 5 years.

Dorothe Norton:
So you were never active and had to go overseas or anything?

George Gavutis:
No, just Reserves and active in the summer for a couple of weeks and 6 months of basic training. And we were fortunate that we didn't end up in Vietnam, that's where we could have ended up. I have a cousin who went to Vietnam and he didn't come back. And a lot of people that came back weren't quite the same either, you know, it did a job on people mentally. It was awful stress seeing that kind of activity.

Dorothe Norton:
When and where and how did you meet your wife?

George Gavutis:

I was working at Parker River as a student assistant in the summers. And just a friend and I took a ride down the beach. I tell people I picked her up on the beach! Her mother doesn't want to hear that! But basically we saw these two gals sitting on a blanket when we were down at Hampton Beach here, and we just decided to go down and talk to them. And I'm usually very shy so it was kind of out of character for me. The fellow I had with me probably was a little more outgoing than I was. But we met these two girls and I said, "I'll go down with you to talk with them as long as I can talk to the blonde." I just seemed partial to blonds. The other one was a redhead. They're both pretty girls. After that evening her friend said to her she said, "I think you're going to marry that guy." We just stayed for the evening and then we started dating.

Dorothe Norton:
So when and where did you marry?

George Gavutis:
We got married. We eloped because of the differences in our religious backgrounds and the family kind of stuff. We just said the heck with this, you know, the headaches. We had the reception afterwards. But we got married in I believe Kingston, New York; we eloped out just into the eastern, in the Catskill region of New York. I was working by that time at Montezuma Refuge on the New York Thruway in New York, in western New York out towards Niagara Falls. And commuting home weekends to visit with Sandra, and that was a long ride. I will call it that; I used to fly up and down the interstate. And soon as we got married we had to get a bigger car because of all of the luggage. So I had to get rid of my little sports car.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you have any children?

George Gavutis:
We have 2 boys. Both of them were born in New Jersey, at different refuges in New Jersey that we worked on. We lived at 2 different refuges.

Dorothe Norton:
And what are they doing now?

George Gavutis:
One's in San Francisco and he's kind of into computer things; he plays with sound and different things for commercials and he does websites. He was working for an insurance company as kind of there computer person in Chicago but now he's freelancing and he's working on stuff for video tapes for sound and for commercials. He's kind of artistic, a real artistic boy.

The other was kind of a glorified disc jockey. This was the fellow who just was here with George. He had his own company and he traveled all over the east as far as Ohio and down to Tennessee giving shows. He had a huge truck he had full with big screen television and video equipment, and he had strobe lights and steam machines. He would do mobile video dance things. So he would go to orientation parties at universities all over the east coast, they would hire him. Or he did weddings or big company bashes, things like that. He finally got a real job! It was very demanding, he had no social life, he worked every weekend, he was on the road

every weekend with his truck and the crew of 3 or 4 people, they had a camera man who would take pictures of the people dancing and then putting that up on the screen along with the video music with the video that goes with the music they were playing. He had record albums that would fill this room and tapes and cd's and videos and old records and everything. He now works for a company that sells that kind of equipment, home entertainment systems, but on the very expensive side, on the upscale. It seems to be a lot of people in this area that have a lot of money and they're into that kind of thing. So that's what he's doing now.

Dorothe Norton:
So you just have the 2 sons, no daughters?

George Gavutis:
No daughters, much to Sandra's dismay. She's hoping for granddaughters, and both of our sons have not married yet but they are at least dating, so there's hope!

Dorothe Norton:
That day may still come.

George Gavutis:
Yeah, she's hoping.

Dorothe Norton:
Why did you want to work for the Service then when you started looking for jobs?

George Gavutis:
Well, my father wanted me to be an electrical engineer because that's where some jobs were but I didn't like math. I kind of found math interesting but I found it very hard, I had to work very hard to do well in math. And I really was more interested in the outdoors. So I knew there were some careers in forestry, so I started as forestry major. And then when I got to the University of Massachusetts I realized that there was actually also a wildlife management program, which sounds a lot more... Well, it almost sounded like the kind of things that you shouldn't get paid for, being in the outdoors and working! So I found out about this student assistant program one spring when one of the Regional Office people, Merton Radway, came to visit the university. We had a co-op student program there. So he interviewed me and I got a job with the Fish and Wildlife Service at Parker River as a student when I was like a sophomore probably in college. And like I said, I learned more in the field as far as applied to my work with the Service than what I got in school, but you still had to have that piece of paper, a bachelor's degree to get a job in the first place.

Dorothe Norton:
What did you do as a co-op student?

George Gavutis:
Well, I did a lot of wildlife surveys, wildlife inventories of all of the birds; the waterfowl, the shorebirds. I did habitat work like I mapped impoundments, marshlands, and did vegetative transects to determine what kind of species were there. I did a lot of experimental work with

mowing and crushing of cattail and different plants, trying to promote waterfowl food plants, making the area better for wildlife. So that's kind of always been my thing anyway since then too. And restoring drained wetlands and things like that. I was also the regional pothole blasting expert. We used ammonium nitrate, like Tim McVey used on Oklahoma City, to blow, with the U.S. Army Reserves, to blow potholes into wetlands where they had filled in with solid cattail and there's no water. We would ignite these potholes and make... And we actually used ammonium nitrate and fuel oil in a plastic bag with a dynamite cap, which is a very powerful explosive as people found out over the internet. You use agricultural ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel and you have a bomb in effect as we found out in Oklahoma City.

Dorothe Norton:
So where did you go from there then?

George Gavutis:
Well, I was at Parker River for 3 years and then I went into the active military for 6 months. And when I came out, I got put on as probably a GS-5. Not a trainer, I wasn't permanent, I was temporary, I was like a laborer I think basically. But I was doing this pothole work and I was doing reports, I was doing biological-type things or fuel things. And I was on like a 6-month appointment. And then I finally got a full-time appointment to Montezuma Refuge. I even came back to Parker River and went down to Bombay Hook in Delaware on this pothole blasting thing while I was working at Montezuma.

In Montezuma I didn't know a thing about surveying or anything, but I was a quick learner and my boss taught me how run a level, a dumpy level. I took the plans they had drawn up for a 5-mile dike system at Montezuma to restore some drained, 600 acres of drained wetlands. And basically I was in charge of like a 20 person crew of sawyers; dragline operators, bulldozer operators, oilers, laborers. And basically we built this 5-1/2 miles of dikes in 300 acre impoundments in that year and a half I was there. It had a timber area that had been drained along the New York Barge Canal near Cayuga Lake, right on the Montezuma Refuge. So that was kind of my main assignment.

I also worked with Law Enforcement when I was there when I got my credentials for Law Enforcement. We also had muck fires, peat fires, which was burning stumps and it got into the ground. So I spent the summer and fall one season extinguishing muck fires, ground fires that would pop up because it was all organic soil there, it was peat or muck. So I had a lot of firefighting experience. The Law Enforcement I did a lot of riding around with the game agents. And also during the refuge hunting seasons we had waterfowl hunting on the refuge for Canada geese particularly and ducks and deer hunts.

So that was my first year and a half, it was very busy. And I was mostly concentrating on things that wouldn't normally be considered your permanent job because I was like a foreman. I had a foreman actually, I was his boss, but basically kept this dike going and it kind of marked me for my next couple of assignments. I got assignments because I did so well on the building of these impoundments that I did the same thing at Iroquois Refuge later in my career, or a couple of years later. And I did the same thing at Great Swamp, where I was the manager finally. I was in charge of Great Swamp for 5 years, and took that 5,000 or 6,000 acre area from the biggest body

of water wasn't as big as this on that 6,000 acres, it was all ditches, it all drained. And so my boss put me there on purpose, who was Tom Horn, and he was the refuge supervisor at that time. And he put me there and he funded me and he gave me assistance so that I could have an assistant for instruction, an assistant for biology. And in 3 years we had 3,000 acres flooded on this 5,000 acre area, which was barren and dry, there was hardly a drop of water on it, there was a little pond, maybe a quarter of an acre and that was it. There were a lot of big ditches with a little water in the bottom and any ducks that were there were in the bottom of this little ditch that was drying up because it was draining. When I left there was 3,000 acres flooded and we had gone from no wood ducks produced to 7,000 wood duck eggs being laid and producing 5,000 baby wood ducks.

Dorothe Norton:
And where did you from there? You just kept going up?

George Gavutis:
From Montezuma Refuge I went to Brigantine Refuge for 2 years. There I did waterfowl studies, mostly on my own time I published in the Journal of Wild Management and in the northeast section of Wildlife Society's annual meeting where they published the minutes of the meetings and presented papers, several papers, mostly on the Brigantine Refuge. I did a nesting study where I found these 700 waterfowl nests; swans, ducks, geese. And then we did banding studies on how to estimate how many ducklings were being produced.

I went to Canada each year. Sandra and I had our first boy conceived in Canada in a tent. By day we banded ducks in traditional cage traps. We were with a U. S. Game Agent and his son. We were on an island, a remote island on Lake Abitibi in Quebec, Ontario border as far north as the roads go. And we only went to town once a week for supplies, and our only refrigeration was a cake of ice that we would get at a farmer's place. She even baked a blueberry pie with our generator. We had a generator because we had an airboat. So by day we banded ducks in traps, we caught a Canada Lynx and lots of ducks, and by night we night lighted. I was an airboat operator; I brought the airboats from Montezuma and Brigantine up with me. And we'd go out every night. So we didn't get much sleep, we were out all day banding ducks. We maybe slept 4 or 5 hours. Sandra would sleep against the airboat cage because she wouldn't be left in the tent because there were bears and wolves and everything or moose fighting and knocking down trees. One night we came back and our tent was flattened because they got caught in one of the guard ropes when they were fighting, the moose. And we had a bear try to get into the tent one night. We couldn't bring guns into Canada because we were, even the game agent couldn't, because we were foreign government. So all we had for protection from the bear was an axe, I had an axe. So I whacked the bear on the snout as he stuck his nose into the tent, and that chased him off! So that's the kind of things we did.

Then from Brigantine we went to Iroquois for a year. And I built another 1,000 acre impoundment there while I was there, I had charge over that. And I ran the farming program and the grazing program and the fur trapping and the hunting programs. I was basically the assistant to the refuge manager there. And he was a good refuge manager, he was Larry Smith. And if you didn't work for Larry Smith for a year or two, you didn't get anywhere in this region. He was the mentor that the Regional Office recognized anyway. So Ed Moses and Jack Fillio might

have even worked for Larry at Iroquois. He was at Iroquois Refuge for kind of a long time. But Ed Moses, Tom McAndrews, all of the people who became refuge supervisors and senior refuge managers in the northern part of the region worked for Larry Smith.

I was only there a year, and he wanted me to stay at least two, but my boss said that they wanted me to go to Great Swamp. And that was where all the wetlands were drained and so we worked on that. We built that program up. I was really basically almost the first fulltime refuge manager with staff and an office and everything. So we went from a very limited staff and facilities to pretty significant staff, maybe with 10 people, and then huge programs with another 20 kids in the summer and their staff.

We were there 5 years and then they wanted me to come to Parker River and I kind of at the time I was... We were all getting shuffled around, this was the way the Service operated then, you didn't stay very long, and 5 years was a long time. The longest anybody had been a refuge manager at Parker River when I got there was 8 years, and I tied that record, but that was Gordon Nightingale. But there'd been like 10 or 12 or 15 managers there. There was a manager's list in the office that showed you who was there when. Jack broke all the records, he stayed like 12 years. But everything's changed in the Service now, nobody makes anybody move anymore. Basically people can live out their whole career once they get to be a refuge manager at one station, and a lot of them are doing that. And it's kind of tough in a way because there are people that are at stations they don't want to be at, and they can't move because there are no openings. And the salaries are very much equal all around the region, but in some communities like northern Maine the refuge managers are the more wealthy people in town because it's a paper mill economy or logging economy or pulp, and people are not well-to-do at all. But the refuge managers are great because he's got a staff of 10 or 20. So that's kind of how the Service has changed over those years.

And after being at Parker for 8 years then I had to go to the Regional Office. I was in several times for assignments. I was in Washington for assignments and details for 13 weeks doing things like that but finally they made in permanent in the Regional Office. I started in the Regional Office, it was in Boston and then it moved out to Newton Corner and then it moved finally to Amherst. And I was only coming home weekends because it was a 2 hour ride each way. We looked at relocating there, we spent or a weekend particularly looking at properties and we just decided we didn't really want to move and I was only 2 years from being 55. And I always said I'd retire at 55 so I could spend more time hunting and fishing, but I find I fish less now! I have friends that are still working in Hadley in the Regional Office that fish 3 times what I do because I'm still too busy. I've got this property and we have a tree farm here, we have Christmas trees, this past summer I sold fruit, several hundred pints of fruit to a farm stand of blueberries, cultivated blueberries that I cover with netting, raspberries and blackberries. And then in the month of June I'm up at a lake in Bangor for the last couple of years, up north of here, doing bird surveys, only I'm under contract. Then at Rachel Carson I do some bird surveys under contract. And I'm working for agencies like the Lamprey River Advisory Committee, the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the Nature Conservancy, and I'm doing habitat ascertainment. It's like a Realty function, its biological ascertainment where I go out and look at properties and say what's there and what's there for wildlife, what priority would be for acquisition.

Dorothe Norton:
So you stayed there until you retired, in the Regional Office?

George Gavutis:
I stayed in the Regional Office. I was refuge supervisor and then I was a regional biologist and I supervised all the biological programs in the region and I had like 6 or 8 people. I had Alan Carter, who's the fire officer down at Great Dismal Swamp, but he worked for me, and the regional woodcock biologist worked me, and there were several zone biologists. So that was my program the last 6 or 8 years I think that I worked for the Service.

Dorothe Norton:
So what was your title and grade and date of retirement?

George Gavutis:
I was GS-14 or GM-14. A simple title would be a regional biologist, but I was a senior staff biologist or something like that.

Dorothe Norton:
What date did you retire?

George Gavutis:
It was in '95, it was like in '95 in January. It will be 6 or 7 years this January, I've lost count.

Dorothe Norton:
It was in January, and you think it was '95?

George Gavutis:
Yes, it was either '95 or '96; I think it was '95.

(There's a Caroline wren, that's a southern bird on the feeder right there that's just showing up in New England. It's a bird that's very common in New Jersey, Connecticut, and on south. And now they spend the winter here, it's like the Cardinals. We never had Cardinals when I first moved here.)

Dorothe Norton:
What were some of the major issues that you were involved with and you had to deal with?

George Gavutis:
Well, lots of issues, we always had problems. Basically, I was supervising a lot of people on those 4 different refuges. So some of the refuge problems I guess. Well, one of the biggest issues I was involved with was when I was at Great Swamp we had an overabundance of deer, and it was a new national wildlife refuge and the habitat was being decimated by deer. And because our policy was we didn't allow hunting on a refuge until we had an approved plan and you had to go through all of this. And we didn't own enough land, we owned pieces of land. So the herd got out of control there, and there are very high numbers in New Jersey anyway. It's one of the highest deer herds in the east. So the habitat was being decimated, so the migratory birds never placed even a nest in the bushes because there were no branches on them, that kind of thing. And birds that nested on the ground didn't have any cover, and animals that needed cover you know. So we proposed a deer hunt, I did, and it went all the way to Washington and got approved. And then at the last minute we were ready to go ahead on our hunt to take out 500 deer a year on this property because there were so many there, to make the herd healthy and the habitat healthy again. And we got a restrain or injunction by the Humane Society of the United States and a whole bunch of other groups. So I ended up in Washington for weeks at Congressional hearings and in front of judges and working with the Solicitor's Office and with the director, who was then Lynn Greenwalt. And I got some very good letters of commendation for my work and testimony in convincing the judges to see things our way and basically turn this thing around so that we finally... Although I was transferred before we actually got a hunt. And then Jack came in behind me, and George Gage I guess was before Jack. I think the first time I was with Jack was manager at Great Swamp because I had moved to Parker River.

So that was quite a history, and I have a ream of letters from the director and other people and Noble Buell, who was the assistant director I guess, and the assistant secretaries, people like that at the time. So that was a big issue.

Dorothe Norton:
So you feel that was resolved then?

George Gavutis:
Yes, now they've had, every year they have a deer hunt. And in fact now I go down as part of the deer hunt! You know, I don't have a conflict of interest I'm just helping out. Actually, they have the deer under control now. They've had probably 20 years of it. And they had protestors there every year and now the protestors have finally given up. It's become a routine thing, but it was on national television and it was on all of the New York stations. Great Swamp is only 25 miles from Time Square. It's an incredible place, if you stand on the hills around Great Swamp you can see the New York/Manhattan Skyline, and yet where you are is so rural that there's bear and deer and beaver and muskrats, there's thousands of wood ducks. It's an incredible place. It used to be all pretty wild New Jersey from there out, but it's filled in all around it now with people. So it's just a little jewel, a 7,000 acre jewel in this bowl.

It was supposed to have been a New York City jetport. That was another challenge while I was at Great Swamp. That's why the refuge got founded there. People in that area raised millions of dollars and bought 3,000 acres and gave it to the government to stop a jetport. It was supposed to be the fourth major jetport in New York. And they were basically going to take these 200 foot high hills around these 7,000 acres, push them in to fill the swamp and make runways out of it and it was going to be an airport. The New York Port Authority had proposed it. So that was a big... And because of that we also were the first wilderness; they made a wilderness on the refuge because the public and the Service wanted to stop this airport from decimating this wetland, which was a very important wetland. And basically we **(unclear)** by making it productive by putting the water back on it. And then it was first, it was a research natural area, it was the first wilderness area. So we had to tear out Eastern Mississippi. So we tore out miles of paved roads and dozens and dozens of homesteads and old farms and barns and everything. Dumps, we had dumps there that had to be cleaned up. Because of where it was it was being used as a dump, parts of it. So we basically made a refuge out of this area, and there were a bunch of...

I think Great Swamp was probably the highlight of my career, and it was when I was most happy, I was in the field.

Dorothe Norton:
I was just going to ask you, what's the highpoint of your career?

George Gavutis:
That was my highpoint. Unfortunately, it came very early in my career. I got a lot of satisfaction being a refuge supervisor and a regional biologist, giving people money and support and direction to do things like I'd done at Great Swamp and some of the other refuges that I've been at. But there's nothing like being the person on the ground with his own staff and going out after work and seeing the day's work accomplishment. When I was at Great Swamp everybody that lived on refuges then in the refuge's quarters worked 80 hours a week, I mean you worked weekends, nights. At the end of my tenure at Great Swamp in 5 years I went from being one of a very few people there to a large staff. So then I was working 40 hours in the office during work hours, and then after work I'd take my boys, or my number one boy who was old enough and my wife and we'd go around and we'd look at projects. We'd look at new properties we were acquiring and seeing what needed to be done to clean them up and make them into wildlife

habitat again, you know, get rid of a house and get rid of junk vehicles and things like that, and dug up drainage ditches that would make nice ponds like these, so that kind of thing. So when I came here it was natural. Everywhere I went we left a pond right by the residence, a new pond right by every residence that we lived in except Parker River, we were only there 6 months.

So the first thing we did here was to... Actually we had one pond when we moved in. It was all woods here but then we cleared to the house and the gardens and started damning up the ditches that were draining the wetlands here, and digging some ponds and also just diking off some ponds. At that point it was just waterfowl marshes there, the shallow, ducks go in there. We even have moose here once in awhile, we've had moose 2 or 3 times here, not regularly but they come through here.

Dorothe Norton:
I know I see things here, moose crossings, which we don't do those in Minnesota. We have deer but not moose.

George Gavutis:
Yeah, well they have moose in northern Minnesota but we've got moose in southern New Hampshire now. Every town around here has some moose. I'm doing a lot of habitat work for these other agencies and I'm around the Lamprey River and all these towns around here, so I'm out a lot. And I do a lot of volunteer hawk surveys, nesting surveys for birds, breeding bird surveys for Audubon Society that I'm not paid for. More and more I'm getting paid for these things I used to always volunteer for. Even when I was working for the Service on my weekend when I lived here I had more free time, so I would do breeding bird Atlases and things like that. Now most of the work I'm doing I'm getting paid for because people have the money to pay me and they've got to get grants and they want somebody that knows wildlife and knows habitat and how to manage them, which ones to protect and get easements on, things like that. So I'm writing reports all the time on properties.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you ever feel you had a low point in your career? And if so, what was is?

George Gavutis:
Well, I had a supervisor, you might not want to put this, but I had a supervisor that I didn't get along with very well. In fact a bunch of us didn't get along with very well. So I actually applied, I still had 7 or 8 years to go until I was 55, so I actually applied for the director's job in the State of Massachusetts to get out of the Fish and Wildlife Service because I was so unhappy in the Regional Office. At that time I was a refuge supervisor. Because of the boss I had and the relationship we had, I can remember talking to Bill Ashe about it. Bill Ashe was the assistant regional director; his now son is the chief of refuges, Dan Ashe is now. But Bill Ashe was the assistant regional director and very active in Real Estate and Realty and Refuges part of the program. I remember counseling with him and he was pretty unhappy that I was looking to get out of the Service and find another career. I was going to take an early, I guess I could have got out with 25 years in maybe or I would have had... I don't know. It was a pretty radical move. It turned out I didn't get selected, I was in the top group but a lot of political things with these state director jobs. I really didn't want to go another 20 years as an administrator either. So that was

probably very near my low point. Things resolved, my boss moved to a higher boss in Washington and things got a little more comfortable.

Then I changed to be the regional biologist, and I really liked that because I'm really a biologist. I've been all of these things. And I always had good relationships with my staff and people skills, but just doing people's performance evaluations and budgets and problems you have to solve and all of this stuff. Political stuff in the east is awful because everything's politics, and every time you change administrations you have problems with budgets and things, you know, with changes. That really wasn't my forte, I really...

So now any consulting job I take they're all jobs that I would do for nothing, or have done for nothing, but now they've got money and I'm in such demand that I have to turn jobs down. So I turn down the ones that are, like when a contractor that wants to get me to help him put a subdivision in or fill a swamp or something, I don't take that job. Or if I do I give him a report that he just won't... So I kind of am pretty fussy what I take now, and I'm very busy this season. I do a lot of hunting still, I have a bird dog. That's where we're going this afternoon; we're going up north in the mountains. We can drive from here to north of the mountains in two and a quarter hours. I can be in the bird covers with ruffed grouse and pheasant and woodcock in about two and a half hours from the time I leave here at noon if I live at noon or 2:15. I have a friend that's taking the afternoon off and we plan to go. He's still working so he has very limited time and we're trying to do it between the rains because it's supposed to rain again tomorrow I guess.

Dorothe Norton:
Did you ever have a frightening or a dangerous experience?

George Gavutis:
Yes, I'm trying to think if any of them were, how many of them were Service. Oh yeah, I can think of one. I was the primary airboat operator in the region that would go to Canada and up into northern Maine. Then the agents were all called game management agents then. I had a very good relationship with them because they would get all the banding the summer in Canada and I was banding. So we were up on Merrymeeting Bay in Maine, which is only 2 or 3 hours from here, but I was working in New Jersey at the time, so I trailed the boat all the way up there. I went on up with the state biologist and the state fish and game agents and the federal agents.

And we were out one night on Merrymeeting Bay. It's a huge tidal bay with like 11 foot tide but its fresh water. It's brackish water because the tide doesn't push the fresh water back so it doesn't really get salt water. And it's a wonderful duck area; I still go up there on my own, hunting rails or ducks or something once or twice and just to see the place. But it's thousands and thousands of acres of wild rice like you get in Minnesota in some of those big lakes there, shallow lakes. And it was loaded with ducks.

We were out one night and the game agents... I was a young kid, you know, running this boat, and I had this fancy equipment and nobody had ever seen this type of stuff before. But there are a lot of idiosyncrasies to running an airboat and you have to be very conscious of it. There are no brakes on it. So the first thing people do when an emergency happens, they reach for the

brake or they take their foot off the gas. With an airboat you have to push down on the gas because otherwise you're out of control, you start spinning out of control. So you have to power through the problem, you really just can't stop, you have to steer. And the only way you can steer is to be giving it gas. Anyway, these guys are taunting me to run this boat and I actually trained one of them a little bit during the day when we were out scouting, I let him run the boat a couple of times. But you can't prepare anybody. I've had by this time many close calls with the airboat and problems, and I learned what I could do and what I needed to do. But try to teach somebody in 30 minutes how to run one of these things. The airboat operator would be me usually and then we'd have the two agents or whoever, the state biologist, with the nets behind bright, bright lights. We'd go out in the marsh at night and the ducks would think its dawn, its blinding light and noise, the generators running, the airboat engines running. So it's very noisy and very bright and the ducks don't know what's going on. I mean they'd just kind of yawn and flap their wings and go back to sleep or they'd think their having a nightmare. And behind these lights the nets come out and pick them up. If they're big enough to be banded we'd catch them and we'd put them in a crate. As soon as the crates are full with maybe 50 or 100 ducks we'd stop for an hour or two and we'd just run the generator. Turn the engine off and we'd band all these ducks and then let them go, and we'd do it again. We'd do this all night long until dawn and then we'd go home and go to bed or scout for the next day.

So one of the agents was really bugging me, I don't even remember... I think Bill Snow was in the boat, he was an agent from Maine, and Howard Brown might have been there, he was also one of the New Hampshire agents. They were good friends too, Brown worked with me in New Jersey a few years, he was the agent down there for awhile.

And so we were running along, a little flying, we had quite a few birds. So I turned the boat over to one of them and I was up netting. And we were coming along, and its deep water. With airboats deep water is dangerous because you're pushing a bow wake, and if you try to change direction quickly or stop the wake can come over the back of the boat, or if you turn it can go right over the front of the boat. So you have to be very careful. And we had to go slow for these ducks. So you're churning around and you're kind of chasing the ducks at times, they're swimming ahead of you and you try to just go a little faster and creep up on them and then you net them.

And there was suddenly a duck to the side, and the agent pointed towards this duck, and I was on the other side, and he pointed to this duck and the agent that was running the boat lifted his foot off the gas pedal and tried to cut the rudder. It went down like a stone, just like that! And I'm going like this, "Speed it up, go faster!" It was too late. We went right to the bottom. Well, the boat went right under. The engine was still running. We were out in this bay, miles from shore, wild rice all around. And right below was a tidal bore. On the Kennebec River it goes through where it's really a scary place, where a wall of water comes up and out with each tides, and there was rocks and all kinds of things. And we were only about a 1/2 mile from that. You can hear it roaring. And immediately the ducks were all going to drown in the crates. I was in the front of the boat, and that was going down first, so we all scrambled to the back. We were up on the cage of the airboat, and it went to the bottom. Fortunately it was only about 9 feet of water there, so we were up on the tip of the cage! Well also, the crates were floating around with ducks in them trying to swim, and so we were opening the crates and letting the ducks go before they all

drowned. And our generator was running. The motor was running so the motor sucked in water before it stalled. He didn't shut it off that quick. It happened just simply in a second. So it's 3 o'clock in the morning and the tide was fortunately falling, it was a full tide. So we waited until morning and slowly the cage started coming out of the water and the boat started.... The boat was tipped up with the nose down and the cage was up, and then it kind of leveled. So finally we got to the point where it was daylight and one of the agents said, "I can make it to shore here, it's only a mile across these mudflats." And he said, "I'm going for help." So he went. And as soon as the water dropped below the sides of the boat on the outside, we started bailing like crazy to get the boat to float. And then while we still had some water we started walking the boat to shore.

We had to take it to an airport, we got it out and we had to take it to an airport and they took every piece of the motor apart, and the generator had (**unclear**). Took it apart, dried, oiled, and put back together. It was a big project.

So that was pretty scary. I've had a lot of experiences like that, both in my own time and with the government, but that was probably the scariest.

Dorothe Norton:
What would you like to tell others about your career and about the Fish and Wildlife Service?

George Gavutis:
Well, it's a special group as you know. Unfortunately, maybe it's because I'm getting older and I'm retired, or when I was getting close to retirement, but I was less and less happy with the way the Service... The Service has changed totally from what it used to be. There are so many other divisions that are more well-funded and have more support. I've always been very frustrated seeing the decline, what I consider to be decline. We've bought so many new refuges without the funds to really take care of the ones we even have. So it got to be that maintenance backlog was horrible because of being low supervision, we never had enough money to maintain our facilities. We've got drained wetlands on refuges now that we never had. I mean we're buying new land but we haven't got the money to manage it, clean it up and make a good habitat. Flood it again and plug the ditches up that drain it, they still drain. And a lot of the political stuff, I mean we never had political directors and regional directors and everything else. Politics is getting into every level. The other frustrating thing is that it changes with every administration; I mean the budget process changes every time a new administration comes in. I mean a company can never operate that way, they'd go out of business. But that's how the reality is of it. It got to be very frustrating near the end. But I can't imagine, and when I started, and it's still very much true, there's a very large cabaret of people that are just dedicated. I mean you don't get that in any other government agency. You talk to people who work for the government or people think, "Oh, you work for the government. Oh, you must be mediocre." I mean they're thinking of maybe IRS or Social Security or some other agency. And you try to explain to them that the Fish and Wildlife Service or the Park Service, these are different people; even the administrative types are different people. They love what they do and the camaraderie is wonderful in the Regional Office or on a refuge and even between divisions. But you see the changing, you see the changes, the pushes to take in people that are political, have political pull, that kind of thing. It made a big difference I think, not to the best course.

Dorothe Norton:
Where do you see the Service heading?

George Gavutis:
Well, they've got 400 or 500 refuges, when I started it was less than 300. Oh, I think the exciting thing about the refuges, and it always will be, is it's permanent, and it isn't a passing thing. I've worked with landowners on forest management and habitat and stuff, and in many cases they sell the property and it goes to somebody else. But the refuges are there forever, and even if we don't take the best care of them of all the time or do everything that could be done, they are always going to be there. It would take an act of Congress to get rid of even one refuge, and it's been tried.

So I think, I mean I think it is the best land protection, wildlife protection in the world probably. Between us and the Park Service and Forest Service, we have a model. And I've worked for the Forest Service too as a volunteer. The Park Service, I do work for the Park Service right now on National Scenic River, on the other side.... If you cross the Lamprey River it comes out of the Pawtuckaway State Park, and that's where the river goes in it. And I'm doing all the surveys of properties along that, and that's being protected with easements because it is now officially a National Wild Scenic River under the Park Service.

So I think other than frustrations, I mean unfortunately I don't think it will ever be the same as when the J. Clark Salyer and Stewart Udall Secretary of Interior. The national politics were different then and everything was different and everything was different. We've got more and more pressures on refuges you know, and people living in this, probably hundreds. It's kind of frustrating to see refuges that we didn't acquire enough land on, we didn't get a buffer. Like Rachel Carlson, a lot of it, we own one side of the ditch and somebody else owns the other, and they're putting a house on the upland edge there and it kind of spoils it. We used to do condemnations and things like that, which was pretty brash but in many cases like Parker River there was no clear title to the land. But now we don't do anything but (**unclear**) unless it's an extreme emergency. So it's frustrating but it's still... It's like living in the United States; democracy is the worst government except for all the others you know! So certainly you can't fault what we've done up until now, and I'm sure it's going to continue. It's just as you get older too, I think, you're less open to change. I'm not that old yet but I can see... Technology kind of scares me, you know, kids not being involved in fishing and hunting like they used to be when they were my age. And we didn't get into much trouble as the kids some of them are now because they always watch television. Maybe this is all going to change; things have a tendency to go full circle, just like we go in and out of area offices every 5 or 10 years or something that's like them to manage the Service.

Dorothe Norton:
Okay, we're just about to the end here. Do you have any photographs, documents or anything that you'd care to donate or share?

George Gavutis:

I do, in fact I put in a claim along with a lot of other people, refuge managers, for Law Enforcement coverage because of all the work that we did on refuges as a Law Enforcement Agent, particularly Parker River and Great Swamp and this region, those are big public use, hundreds of thousands of visitors. We had murders, rapes, burglaries, breaking and entering, you know, drugs, you name it, we had it all. And we were working with the agency and with the state police and the state. We would have state deputy credentials. I was a deputy, a state police officer in Massachusetts along with my federal credentials. The agents used to come to the refuges because they didn't really, and what they were doing way back, and of course they were game agents, they didn't get involved with drugs and all of this other... It was car stops and speeding and all that kind of stuff. They do more now, undercover and a lot of that stuff; they get involved with some pretty scary stuff. But then it was more mundane, they did banding in the summers and they worked waterfowl hunters basically, and that was mostly what they did. Now they're specialists that are dealing with undercover operation big stuff, ivory and major species and all of that. We didn't have that kind of thing going.

But as a result of that I have a lot of annual narratives that were... Each manager on each refuge, we wrote an annual report every year on each refuge and it was circulated around the country. So I have annual narratives, partly just because I was a manager and I got them before I left or somebody sent them to me. The circulating copy went around the country and it took 2 or 3 years, but every manager in the country commented on your narratives. So I have some pretty interesting narratives with nice... All of my narratives were very heavy color photography, I was kind of a renegade at that time and people really got excited when they saw color photos in an annual report, you know. But I got a lot of letters, favorable comments from all levels of the government for that. So I thought I would probably donate those. And I have some other stuff too.

Dorothe Norton:
Well, I'll talk to Mark Madison and ask him how he wants that sent, whether he wants you to send it directly to the school or whether he wants you to send it to me and I'll have the...

George Gavutis:
I might keep some of it for a little while longer, but I would like to have it go to the Service. And I wouldn't mind having a good part of it go, in some cases I have extra copies.

Dorothe Norton:
Well you have my email; you can just let me know.

George Gavutis:
Well that would be my plan. Now we've done a will and I haven't mentioned this stuff but I am. It's all going to end up being in one file drawer or a couple of boxes or something, and I'll make sure that it's in our mixed revision of our will and that my son knows that I want to go in case it doesn't get done before something happens to me, you know I can killed driving out the driveway here. But Sandra would know if she was still alive, and that's what we talked about doing with it. And they could just throw what they don't want of it away, you know. But I have old badges. We had like 16 different badges; we went from bronze to gold. I still got my state

deputy badge. All these things, they didn't want them back because they changed the badges and when they changed them they said we could keep them. But I don't have a good collection of badges and patches but people like Ed Moses have even more. But I think the thing to do is any of this that we think might be of value is to turn it over to the Shepherdstown people and let them throw it away or if they could find something to do with it. But I know that the narrative reports are no longer kept in the Washington office, they're no longer kept in the Regional Office or even in the refuge. When I went down to Parker River they were missing one or two. I have one of theirs that I may still return. But they also have 4 copies of some which they didn't want and they were going to throw them out, so I got a copy of each of the ones of the 8 years I was there. And I got whatever I could, the circulating copy that went around the country. So that to me is a jewel because it's thick and it's got a whole refuge operation for that station. And there's one for every refuge in the country practically, all the big refuges. And like I said, it took 2 or 3 years to go around the country, to come back to the parent's station. By that time sometimes you were gone and you know I didn't get them. Like I got several from Great Swamp and I got all of Parker Rivers now. I think they've microfiche some of it. But these were the comments from people like John Eadie and everybody who was a manager, John Carlson and on and on, Ed Crozier. All of these people have signed these narratives with comments saying, "Say hello to the staff there and such and such who transferred to Region 3." And, "Great report, I really enjoyed the section on Law Enforcement" or this thing or that. So I think it would be worth preserving some of them.

Dorothe Norton:
I think so too.

George Gavutis:
Even if you had one or two from each refuge it would be pretty important. I even had cover photos on it, you know, I'd have like an osprey with a goldfish or big buck deer that was standing outside the refuge office or things like that. They're almost like an Audubon Magazine or something, but on refuges.

Dorothe Norton:
Well I will ask Mark Madison.

George Gavutis:
Yeah, see what he things about them.

Dorothe Norton:
I'll let you know because I know Dave Swendsen gave me 3 different books that he's written and so I will send those into Mark and I'll ask him too if anyone has a copy of them.

George Gavutis:
They might put them in the library... Dave wrote those after didn't he?

Dorothe Norton:
Pardon me?

George Gavutis:
Didn't Dave write those after he worked or when he retired?

Dorothe Norton:
He's teaching Law Enforcement.

George Gavutis:
I know he is, at UNH isn't it, yeah.

Dorothe Norton:
Who else do you think we should be interviewing?

George Gavutis:
Well, I think Ed Moses in Danville, New Hampshire. It's just 6 miles from Jackson, maybe 9 miles from here. He's over off of 111, on the other side of Kingston.

Dorothe Norton:
We're working with (**unclear**) and we're trying to update all of the... And when I find there are more out here I'll be out again. I don't always want to just do Law Enforcement and so when I found you two fairly close to...

George Gavutis:
But we're Law Enforcement too, Jack had Law Enforcement. I think he gave it up at Parker River though because of the training. I went to the 8 weeks or whatever the heck it was down at Quantico. It started with 2 and then it went to 4, and they wouldn't let me go then. They sent all of my assistants because they didn't know anything about Law Enforcement, but here I am practicing it, you know. And finally they said, "Well, you're not going to be able to keep your Law Enforcement unless you go." But these other guys who said this course should be 8 weeks long or whatever, "Now you've got to go." I almost dropped it, and a lot of people did, Jack dropped it because that's 2 months away from your station to Law Enforcement. But I was at Parker River at the time, and that was a police state down there, I mean that refuge is hundreds of thousands of visitors with all kinds of problems. And that was a big part of the job, we wanted to go north but there were always calls coming into the office for some backup or assistance, a problem at the gate and you had to handle it, whoever was there. So I kept my Law Enforcement even as the manager. A lot of managers gave it up at that point because they said, "We can't go away for 8 weeks and then 2 weeks or a week every year for refresher and all that stuff."

Dorothe Norton:
Okay.

George Gavutis:
Well nice to have met you.

Dorothe Norton:
Well yes, and thanks a lot George for your time.